

THE IMPORTANCE OF RELIGIOUS  
INSTRUCTION ILLUSTRATED:

IN A

# S E R M O N

P R E A C H E D A T

S<sup>T.</sup> T H O M A S,

J A N. 1, 1790.

F O R T H E

BENEFIT of the CHARITY-SCHOOL,

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G R A V E L - L A N E , S O U T H W A R K .

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S E R M O N, &c.

J O B XXIX. 15.

I WAS EYES TO THE BLIND.

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HOW important and how various are the duties of the Christian life! Into how many parts does the service, which we are sent into the world to perform, divide itself! When we think of the nature and obligations of religion, we are immediately reminded of the love and reverence which we owe to the God who made us. That Being, whose power hath formed every thing, whose wisdom governs the world, and whose goodness is the support and consolation of the human race, ought to be the first object of our attention and esteem. To bow the knee at his throne, and to acknowledge him worthy of all honour and blessing and praise, is the most reasonable service in which we can be

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engaged

engaged. Daily to recollect their obligations to him, to confess their numerous transgressions, to seek his forgiveness, to pray for his assistance in the performance of every duty, and to commit themselves to his influence and guidance, is the duty of all that know his name.

But, besides those duties which we owe more immediately to God, he has taught us what we owe to the world around us. Though pleased with the humble and devout offering presented to him by the upright in heart, yet he hath informed us, that something more is necessary to be performed by his servants. From the devotions of the family and the closet, we are to go forth into the world; from holding intercourse with the *Father of our Spirits*, we are to proceed to intercourse with our brethren of mankind. Withdrawing our eye from his throne, we may look round upon that part of his numerous family, with which we stand connected; and inquire how far we may promote his glory, by doing good to those, whom he has committed to our care. From his presence we ought always to retire with that improvement of temper, which may fit us for the important offices of humanity. What is so likely to produce those benevolent affections, which are the ornament of our nature; or to prompt us to that beneficent conduct, which our fellow creatures demand, as the

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contemplation of that goodness whence all our blessings flow ?

The claims of our fellow-mortals vary, according to the rank of life, in which they are placed, and the different abilities, which we possess. Whilst respect and reverence are due to our superiors ; whilst candour and courtesy may be expected by our equals ; those, whom Providence has placed in the lower classes of life, have a demand upon our charity. To support the weak, to comfort the aged, to clothe the naked, to feed the hungry, to teach the ignorant, are offices with which humanity invests us ; and which Christianity has expressly appointed. It is to the last of these, that your attention is now to be directed.

When the afflicted Job looked back on his former prosperity, and remembered how it was with him *in months past, in the days when God preserved him, when his candle shined upon his head* ; he recollects that these days were spent in communicating happiness to others. *When the ear heard him, then it blessed him ; and when the eye saw him it gave witness to him ; because he delivered the poor that cried, and the fatherless, and him that had none to help him :* and he remembered amongst other services which he performed, that *he was eyes to the blind.* If called to the office of a magistrate, he arrayed himself in the most respectable attire ; *he put on righteousness, and it clothed him : his judgment was as a robe and a diadem.* He did not

*wrest*

*wrest judgment, but the cause which he knew not, be searched out:* and in this sense did he become *eyes to the blind.* But, without confining the words to this interpretation, we shall consider them as containing a highly figurative representation of the wise and good man, who wishes to give instruction to the ignorant, to impart understanding to the foolish. We shall proceed to offer to your consideration some of the motives, by which such a conduct may be enforced.

It deserves to be considered

I. That to afford instruction to the ignorant is one instance of that benevolent conduct, which the Apostle recommends when he says, *as we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men* \*. Placed as we are in this world, our reason teaches us, that we are sent hither, not only to procure some important benefits for ourselves, but to promote the happiness of others. Endowed with powers, that render us capable of serving ourselves and others, it deserves our serious inquiry, how these are to be employed. As members of a large society, how natural is it for us to infer, that we are sent hither to promote the comfort of those around us. This lesson, therefore, the heathen philosophers taught to their pupils. They could infer the obligation, under which man lies to man; and have produced some admirable sentiments, respecting the importance and extent of social duty. But did

\* Gal. vi. 10.

did reason leave us entirely uninformed, on this subject, as christians we have no plea for our ignorance. The divine oracles have pointed out to us our duty, as members of society, and have taught us how to conduct ourselves in those relations, in which we stand to each other. *Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself\**; *Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies and kindness†*; *Be kindly affectioned one to another‡*; are the precepts of the Gospel. To do good is to resemble God. The perfection of our nature is to be attained, only, by an imitation of him, who is *good unto all, and whose tender mercies are over all his works.*

Natural sympathy prompts us to relieve distress. When the wounded stranger lies in our path, who, without stifling those emotions, which are natural to man, can pass over to the other side, and leave him without assistance. How large the provision for the relief of persons in such circumstances, of which this kingdom can boast! At great expence have those buildings been erected, and those institutions formed, which afford an asylum to the indigent patient. All the assistance that the generosity of the citizen, or the skill of the physician can produce, has been offered them. We are happy in this country, beyond many, in affording so much relief to those, who must otherwise perish before our eyes, and want the

\* Matth. xix. 19.      † Col. iii. 12.      ‡ Rom. xii. 10.

the soft hand of compassion, when it is most of all needed.

But, though this is an important species of benevolence, it is not the only one. We are now directing your attention to that, which is still more necessary. To relieve the body, to chase away pain and disease, is of far less consequence than to heal the disorders of the mind. Ignorance is the worst disease, under which a human being can labour. This brings a torpor on all the faculties of the soul, and threatens the worst kind of death. Ignorance brings down mankind from the elevated situation, for which they are designed, to a level with the beasts that perish: nay, it is possible for them to be so far degraded by it, as, almost, to deface the very characteristic of their species, and to render it difficult for naturalists to know in what class to place them. Because the reason of man is the most important distinction he possesses, because the soul is superior to the body; it certainly demands more of our attention and care. Whilst called upon by every consideration, that reason and scripture can suggest, to do good unto others, let us not forget what we owe to them as rational, accountable, and immortal beings. Let our pity extend itself, not only to those who are pining with hunger, or shivering with cold, but to those who are likely to perish for lack of knowledge. Let us call their attention to the most important branches of knowledge, and open before them

them that revelation, in which are contained the words of eternal life. Let us direct them to the grace of God, as the foundation of every just and reasonable hope; to the death and sacrifice, to the mediation and intercession of Christ, as the means which Divine wisdom has appointed, for the recovery of our fallen race to duty and happiness. Let us exhort them to *work out their own Salvation with fear and trembling*, in a humble dependence upon him, who hath promised to *work in them both to will and to do of his good pleasure\**. To all this, that benevolence, which reason and Scripture recommend, most powerfully calls us.

II. Let us attend to the advantages, which society may derive, from the instruction of its members, in the principles of sound reason and true religion. We have already observed those numerous methods of relieving our fellow creatures, which discover the humanity of the heart; and which have been often mentioned, to the honour of this country. But not only upon principles of benevolence, but of sound policy, such conduct may be recommended. By saving the life, or restoring the health, of a fellow citizen, we may secure some advantage from his farther service. The wounded soldier, or disabled sailor, under the care of our hospitals, may be enabled to go forth again in support of his country's cause. The labourer prevented, by sickness or accident, from

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\* Philippians, ii. 13.

earning his daily bread, might become a burden upon the public, were it not for the provision which has been made for his recovery. Whilst thus serving him, therefore, we are serving ourselves. And for the same reason does that particular species of charity, to which we are now calling your attention, appear important. Does not the happiness of every society depend, in a great measure, upon the conduct of those who compose it? If we consult the history of different states, whether ancient, or modern, we shall find, that their prosperity has, generally, borne some proportion to their virtues. This observation is particularly exemplified in the history of that people, whom God took under his peculiar patronage. When they obeyed *the Lord God of their fathers, and served him with a perfect heart and willing mind\**, he subdued *the people under them and the nations under their feet* †: but when they departed from him, and worshipped the gods of the nations around them, then he gave them up to the will of their enemies. This people, indeed, were under a peculiar kind of government; and we are not to expect that the Most High should, in so visible a manner, interfere in the concerns of individuals, or public communities, in the present day: yet, it will always be observed, by those who diligently attend to these things, that *as righteousness exalteth a nation, so sin is the ruin of a people* ‡. But what is so likely to promote this

B 2                  righteousness,

\* 1 Chron. xxviii, 9.    † Ps. xlvi. 3.    ‡ Proverbs, xiv. 34.

righteousness, as the cultivation of good principles, and the forming of good habits amongst the different ranks and orders of mankind? How necessary, therefore, to offer the means of instruction to the ignorant, to improve the understanding, to awaken the conscience, and thus to do all in our power to insure such important advantages? If the heart be impressed with a lively sense of the presence of that Being, who made, and who governs the world; if the man be convinced that he hateth iniquity and loveth righteousness; if he be taught the gratitude which he owes to his heavenly Father for the numerous favours he enjoys, and, especially, for that great love, wherewith he loved mankind when he sent his Son to redeem sinners; it may surely be expected, that such instruction, through the divine influence, will form him to that temper and conduct which will render him a blessing, in whatever station of life he may be placed, and an ornament to the society, with which he is connected.

There is a consideration, which is not always adverted to;—that those, who now stand in need of our assistance and instruction, may hereafter fill some important stations in society. Though it is the principal object of your benevolence, to render those under your care fit for the service of the community, in some of the inferior offices of life; yet, who can foresee what are the designs of divine providence respecting them? How often do

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men change place in society? They, who were at one time in subjection, have afterwards risen to authority; they, who have been dependent upon the bounty of others, have been raised to a situation, that has enabled them to contribute to the support of the same charitable institution, to which they have been indebted. The stream, which now circulates in the foot, may hereafter animate the head: how necessary, therefore, that this stream be kept pure! By instilling good principles into the mind, we may secure ourselves against the inconvenience arising from ignorance and vice gaining an ascendancy over wisdom and goodness.

Religion serves, more than any other principle, to fit mankind for every station and relation of life. It forms the kind and gentle master, the obedient and faithful servant; it prevents tyranny in the monarch, insolence and licentiousness in the subject. Christianity, tho' it prescribes no particular form of government, yet, commands its followers to be subject to all lawful authority, for their own sake, and for the sake of good order and peace in the society, to which they belong. With great delicacy, it insinuates what is the duty of magistrates, when it assures us that they *are not a terror to good works, but to the evil;* and advises, that if we would not be afraid of the power, we should do *that which is good,* and then assures us that we shall have *praise of the same\**. How, therefore,

\* Romans xiii. 3

fore, can we confer a greater advantage upon society, than by informing the understanding and improving the morals of those who compose it; than by teaching that religion which was sent down from above, as the greatest blessing heaven itself could bestow upon the degenerate children of men?

III. Let me desire you to recollect, that by the encouragement of knowledge, you are serving the cause of God; you are promoting the glory and honour of the greatest and best of Beings. This world is a part of the kingdom of God, and of his Christ. It is a province of that empire, which is universal. The great Governor of all has an interest to be supported, in this part of his dominions; and has conferred a singular honour upon those, whom he has made use of as instruments to promote it. According to the representation of the apostle, the church *is God's bus-bandry, it is God's building*\* : and to fashion men as stones for this building is the design of those various methods, which his wisdom has employed. This was a principal intention of those events, which have taken place in the course of his providence. The revolutions of kingdoms and empires have had a more near, or remote reference to this. The rise and downfall of states, the establishment, or demolition of particular forms of government, the success, or defeat of armies, whilst

\* 1 Cor. iii. 9.

whilst they have gratified the ambition of some, and mortified the pride of others, have been overruled for the good of his church by *him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will*\*. They have been employed for the enlargement of his kingdom, and for the final accomplishment of all the purposes of his grace, towards the children of men. But the cause has been, more evidently, promoted by means particularly adapted to this purpose. He, who first imparted reason to man, has afforded him, at different times and in different degrees, all those assistances, which are necessary for his arriving at that perfection of happiness, of which he is capable. In order to preserve amongst men the knowledge of himself, and to distinguish his worship from every species of idolatry, he chose a nation, which should serve as the sacred depository of truth. His conduct towards this people was to serve as a specimen of his mode of governing the world, in wisdom and righteousness. In the fulness of time, he sent his own Son into the world, that he might fulfil all righteousness; that by the excellence of his doctrine, and the perfection of his example, he might turn men from darkness to light, and from the power of satan unto God ||. Does not all this display the grand purpose of God, respecting the children of men, and evidently shew his wish to promote their spiritual improvement?

And

\* Ephes. i. 11.

|| Acts xxvi. 18.

And are not we, my friends, fellow-labourers in that building, which he is erecting, and husbandmen in that vineyard, which he is planting? Whether or no, the cause of God shall flourish in the world, may in some measure be determined by the zeal which we discover, by the vigilance and labour which we employ for its promotion. Presumption, indeed, would it be for us to suppose that he needs our assistance. He can erect a moral kingdom in the world by other means. He could have continued a series of miracles to the end of time, which should have awakened the attention of mankind, and have gained proselytes to religion: or he could have prolonged the age of inspiration, and have taught men knowledge, without the use of sacred records, or the assistance of fellow-men. He could long ago have *literally* accomplished what the prophet describes of that period when *they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, know the Lord: but all shall know him, from the least of them unto the greatest of them* \*. But he has chosen rather to promote his own glory and the happiness of men, by the assistance of those who are of *like passions* with themselves. He is hereby teaching us the dependence we have upon each other, and encouraging those social affections, which it is our honour and happiness to feel. He is hereby reminding us of the importance of our character and conduct,

\* Jerem. xxxi. 34.

conduct, not only to ourselves, but to all around us. Since he, therefore, has honoured us so far, as to make us the instruments of his glory ; in proportion to the concern which we feel for this, will be our exertions for the promotion of his cause and interest in the world.

IV. We are inviting your attention to a cause, which must infallibly prevail. Shall any plan, which Divine Wisdom has contrived, be defeated ? Can any work, in which Omnipotence is engaged, fail ? From our knowledge of the perfections and characters of God, we may conclude, that what is immediately connected with his glory shall succeed. But we are not left merely to infer this from such obvious principles, but may turn our eye to those prophecies and promises, which insure the final prevalence of truth and righteousness. We are encouraged to hope for a time, when *the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea*\*. Indeed, long since such promises were given, darkness and superstition have reigned over a great part of the globe. Truth and goodness have seemed to be almost banished from the earth. But to this darkness light hath succeeded, and the gospel hath proved itself to be the power of God ; by dispelling ignorance and introducing knowledge. It has been effectual for the conversion of sinners, and the consolation of saints. By teaching this gospel to the ignorant we may therefore hope

\* Isaiah xi. 9.

hope to spread that knowledge, which is of the greatest importance to human happiness.

We do not, indeed, immediately see the effects of our labour to promote the knowledge of God and of his Son Jesus Christ. We may wait long for the accomplishment of our wishes, that Christianity may prevail over ignorance and superstition, that the fear and love of God may triumph over the temptations of the flesh and the world. But let not our hands be weakened, nor our hearts discouraged. Although, in some instances, our endeavours may be unsuccessful; yet, let us rejoice in the hope that they will not be so in all. In how many enterprizes do men engage, and proceed with spirit and activity, though the success thereof be uncertain! A bare probability is, in some cases, sufficient to inspire courage, and insure perseverance. But the labour in which we engage, in obedience to the authority of God, and with the promise of his blessing, shall not be in vain. Sooner let the husbandman cease to till his ground, and to sow his seed, lest the *beavens over his head should be as brass, and the earth under his feet as iron,* than we cease to scatter the seed of wholesome instruction, because it is God only that can *give the increase.* Although it may long lie buried in the soil, it shall not perish there. Under the fostering influences of the sun of righteousness, the earth shall become fertile; by the dews of divine influence, the blade shall spring up,

up, and, in due time, shall bend under the weight of its ear. Although the harvest, which we live to see, may be small and the grain precious ; yet this, when converted into seed for a future crop, shall become more and more fruitful, and at last be productive, beyond our warmest expectation and hope. For we may remark,

V. That the consequences of that *work of faith, and labour of love*, to which we are now exhorting you, will be everlasting. Your attention is directed to a plan, by which the spiritual improvement of mankind may be promoted ; in which the knowledge of God and the Redeemer, the knowledge of the Divine will and of human obligation are concerned. The object of your benevolence is nothing less than calling the attention of persons to that invisible world, into which they must soon enter. You are directing them to the means of making their future existence a blessing to them. You are recommending it to them to cultivate those habits, which will promote their present peace, and their everlasting well-being. You are exhorting them to seek the forgiveness of their sins, the favour of their God, an interest in the redemption of his Son, and that assistance of his Spirit, without which, all the means of happiness you can offer them, will be ineffectual. These are principles and duties which have a relation to eternity.

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Had we only the prospect of securing to mankind some temporal advantages ; and were it necessary to practice some degree of self-denial, in order to this, we could be at no loss to determine what is our duty. That single precept, *Let no man seek his own, but every man another's wealth* \*, is sufficient to teach us what is proper to be done. We rejoice in the extension of civil liberty, and congratulate those, who have thrown off the shackles of tyranny and oppression, and can boast of that freedom which is their birth-right. We applaud the use of the most justifiable means for attaining so glorious an end. But this freedom, great as it may seem, is of small consequence in comparison of that liberty, which the knowledge of truth, and the practice of righteousness produce. The former blessing derives its chief importance from its connection with the latter. It is to be valued, principally, because it secures to the present possessor, or transmits to posterity, the privilege of free inquiry, and the practice of pure and undefiled religion. But with how great difficulty and hazard is all this obtained ! How many perish in the struggle, and live not to enjoy the blessing they have sought ! And if emancipated from slavery and oppression, if a change of government, from the most tyrannical to the most free and easy, be enjoyed, yet, the happy consequences of all this will be but short in their

\* 1 Corinth. x. 24.

their duration. In a little time the possession of merely civil liberty will lose its charms. *The fashion of this world passeth away*, and the grand distinction between bond and free will soon be annihilated. For this reason it is apparent, that the revolution of a state is of less consequence than the *conversion of a sinner*, and the deliverance of an empire from ruin than *the saving of a soul from death*.

Of the truth of these observations, I am persuaded, you are all convinced. Many of you, I trust, know and feel ; that wisdom, religious *wisdom is the principal thing*, and therefore, you have determined *to get wisdom* ; and *with all your gettings to get understanding* \*. It is in your eye *more precious than rubies* ; and *all the things you can desire are not to be compared to it* †. Knowing its value, therefore, you are willing to do all in your power to communicate it to others. It is, then, but to indulge the wish, or at most to form the resolution, and all, that is expected from you, is accomplished.

Very little need to be said to convince you, that the more early the means, now recommended, are employed, the better. Youth is undoubtedly the fittest season for forming the mind, to that temper, and to those habits, upon which the present and future happiness of the man depends. Before sinful propensities have gained too great strength ; before

\* Prov. iv. 7.

† Prov. iii. 15.

before the heart has been hardened, by the long practice of iniquity, and the conscience rendered insensible to reproof, is the time when you are most likely to succeed in making those serious impressions, which by the concurring blessing of the Almighty, may terminate in a serious conversion. *He that has long walked in error and sin, cometh not unto the light, lest his deeds should be reproved\**. *Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the Leopard his spots? no more can they do good that are accustomed to do evil†.* To obviate the difficulty, therefore, which it is almost impossible to remove; to prevent the disease, which it is as difficult to cure; let us offer an antidote to the poison, which may otherwise prove mortal. *Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it §;* is a general maxim, for the truth of which we may appeal to fact and experience.

A conviction of the importance of forming the rising generation, to the love and practice of religion, undoubtedly, gave rise to that institution, which now claims your patronage and support. Most of you are acquainted with its origin and design. It was founded in the year 1687, at a time when a school was set up by Poulton, a Jesuit, and public notice was given of his design to instruct the poor gratis. With a view to counteract the influence of a popish teacher, three gentlemen, Mr. Arthur Shallett, Mr. Samuel Warburton,

\* John iii. 20. † Jerem. xiii. 23. § Prov. xxii. 6.

burton and Mr. Ferdinando Holland opened this school, and provided instruction for the children of the poor on Protestant principles.

From 40, the original number of scholars, they have now increased to almost 200. They are taught to read, write and cypher; and the girls are prepared for those stations, to which Providence may direct them. All are instructed in the principles and duties of Christianity. This is the first school, in the support of which Protestant Dissenters were engaged. It is maintained by the subscriptions and bequests of private persons, together with one annual collection at this place,

To the children of this school I would seriously recommend gratitude to the God who made them, who has preserved them, to the present hour, and who is continually doing them good. It is owing to his goodness, my young friends, that you have been furnished with the means of instruction, which you enjoy. It is he who has disposed so many persons to exert themselves in your favour, and to offer you those advantages, for growing in the knowledge of God, and for obtaining his favour and blessing, which you possess. Take care that you do not displease your heavenly father, by neglecting to improve the means, which have been put into your power. Read his holy word, with seriousness; attend to the instructions given by your teachers; and pray earnestly for that assistance

ance and blessing, which God has promised to all who seek them.

Express your gratitude, also, to those kind friends, who have taken you under their care, and are desirous of furnishing your minds with useful knowledge, in order that you may be comfortable and respectable in this world, and obtain eternal happiness in another. By your diligent application to those things in which you are instructed, and by your kind behaviour to each other, you will give pleasure to these friends, and lead them to hope, that what they have bestowed upon you is not in vain.

When you go forth into the world, frequently recollect the instructions you have received, whilst under the care of your parents, teachers and friends. Guard against the company of the wicked and profane. *If sinners entice you to evil do not consent to them\**; but remember, that the eye of God is ever upon you, and that according to your present temper and conduct he will hereafter reward or punish you. Be diligent in your attendance on his worship, and think it a privilege to meet with his people in his house, and to join with them in calling upon his name, in singing his praises, and in hearing his word. Neglect not to pray unto him, in secret, for the blessings which you want: commit yourselves every day to the care

\* Proverbs i. 10.

care of his providence, to the influence and guidance of his word and spirit. Thus may you hope to pass comfortably through this world, to have the presence of your heavenly father with you when you come to die, and finally to obtain that everlasting life, which is promised to all those who love God, and obey the Gospel of his Son Jesus Christ. Amen.

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